

Experience homegrown Indiana, from seed to stalk to supper table.

By Sally Campbell Grout

It's no secret that the quicker food goes from the farm to your table, the better it tastes. So why not visit an Indiana farm or farmer's market to shop for something fresh from the vine, the tree, or even the cow? And if you really want to know how "fresh picked" your produce is, you can even pick it yourself at some locations. Some Indiana agricultural locations also welcome you to see how the whole process works. Here are a few places to start:

A fun place for kids; a great place for grown-ups.

Where can you find homemade ice cream, a petting zoo, and pony rides for kids and a winery where adults can find something wonderful to enjoy later? At Huber's Orchard and Winery in Starlight (800-345-WINE). Among the many succulent items you'll find at the farmer's market: homegrown berries. But the first item you'll notice (make that "sniff") may be the fresh baked breads from the bakery. And the perfect complement to great bread? Award-winning cheeses from the cheese factory. After a little shopping, pet and feed the baby deer, ducks, rabbits, and other critters at the petting zoo. (Pony rides are also available.) In addition, Huber's Starlight Distillery produces finely crafted brandies and wines.

Three out of four is pretty darned good.

You'll find three seasons worth of yummy fruit, beautiful plants, and great fun at Engelbrecht Orchards near Evansville (812-428-6188). During spring, summer, and fall taste the seasonal apples, peaches, and nectarines that grow on the orchard's 60 acres. Engelbrecht Orchards has two locations to start your adventure, one in Evansville and another in the nearby town of Newburgh. The garden center and three greenhouses are filled with beautiful hanging baskets and tropicals. Prefer plants you can eat? Buy your apples by the bag or pick your own. If you prefer your apples cool and refreshing without the crunch, Engelbrecht's presses about 30,000 gallons of cider a year during a good apple harvest.

Relax on the farm.

What would farm life be like if farmers never had to do any actual work? It would be relaxing and peaceful, like the kind of experience you can have at Harper Valley Farms in Westport (812-591-3416). Spend a few days at Grandma Percy's Hilltop Home, which is located on 120 acres of rolling pasture and cropland. The home is comfy and filled with modern conveniences, but is just steps away from Mother Nature. Skip stones; go

bird watching; play horseshoes. The refrigerator is stocked with fresh eggs and sausage, and can be stocked with homegrown produce and other fresh meats. During July and August, guests at Grandma Percy's will be invited to the Armand Farm for a tour. Harper Valley Pumpkin Patch Days are scheduled for October 15-16 and 22-23, 2005. Sweet corn, tomatoes, and other produce from the farm are available at the Jennings County Farmer's Market (812-346-3455).

A mini-train, a miniature horse, and lots of fun.

The produce and fall pumpkins are a bonus to the dozens of other things to see at Coyote Creek Family Farm in Florence (812-594-3858). To get a good overview, take a hayride around the farm. Or, just take a vintage mini-train ride around the petting zoo barnyard where you might meet a "white" buffalo named Coconut, a horse, a mule, a Shetland pony, a miniature horse, and any number of the farmland friends. You're also welcome to explore the museum, the Whistle Stop Toy Shop, and the Country Store Gift Shop. Mine for gems, dip candles, or take a hike near the mini waterfall and creek area. Visit during "Old-Fashioned Pumpkin Harvest Days" October 8-9 and 15-16, 2005 to pick your own pumpkin and try your hand at carnival games and contests.

Fresh, good, and organic.

Today, most grocery stores offer a selection of organically grown produce. But what about the rest of your meal? At Trader's Point Creamery in Zionsville (317-733-1700) you'll find organic dairy products from cows that graze on pesticide-free, herbicide-free grass. And Fridays from May through October, you can shop for other organic items and enjoy dinner made from locally produced and organic products during the Summer Green Market. The Green Market features products from 15 local farmers who are certified organic or pledge to farm naturally. Products available include vegetables, fruits, dairy, cheese, free-range chicken, and pasture-raised pork, beef, and lamb. The market is opened from 4-7 p.m.; the organic meal is served at 5 p.m. on the deck.

Farmland favorites in the big city.

Indianapolis: a big capital city filled with tall buildings and bustling streets right? Yes...and no. Indianapolis is also home to Waterman's Farm Market (317-356-6995) where you can purchase fresh-picked produce or pick your own. Crops, which include a variety of fruits and vegetables, are available from late May through Thanksgiving. Kids are welcome in the fields, which makes this a great family experience. During the entire month of October, celebrate the season at the Fall Harvest Festival. Take a tractor-drawn hayride to the pumpkin patch, explore the three cornstalk and straw bale mazes, and enjoy dozens of other activities.

How many shopping days?

Is it ever too early to start thinking about Christmas? Not at Ratliff's Pine Retreat Bed and Breakfast in Springport (765-755-3345). Located in the middle of a 50-acre Christmas tree plantation, this comfy place is a great spot to relax any time. But visit from November 21-December 21 to purchase something "homegrown" that may not taste good, but smells great. Ratliff's offers a huge selection and a number of varieties of "choose and harvest," pre-cut, and live Christmas trees, along with a selection of other greenery, such as wreaths and hanging baskets.

Made for fall.

Three guesses what you'll find at Drennen's Pumpkin Kingdom in Montpelier (877-889-5201). OK, so the big, orange jack-o-lanterns in waiting are a given. But you'll find plenty of other activities to fill an autumn day. Visit the farm to walk through a corn maze, meet and pet some animals, take a hayride, and shop at the farm stand. Along with pumpkins, you'll find gourds, squash, squirrel corn, corn stalk bundles, mums, and more fall "must haves."

Life on the farm 1920s style.

One of Indiana's newer state parks, Prophetstown State Park near Battle Ground (765-567-4700) shares the stories of some of Indiana's richest history. The park houses the Museum at Prophetstown, which includes a re-created Native American village and a working 1920s farm. The Wabash Valley Living History Farm includes a replica of a Sears Roebuck and Co. catalogue farmhouse, a barn, a corncrib, a chicken coop, and a Model T Garage.

Get it to go.

During the summer, the pace in Lafayette may slow down a bit as the town prepares for the students and their activities to return to Purdue University in the fall. So it's the perfect time to stroll through the Lafayette Farmers' Market (800-872-6648) to shop for honey, plants, baked goods, fruit, vegetables, herbs, gourds, and other fresh products. The market is open during limited hours from May through October. Call for times.

Just don't drink out of the carton.

Milk is a staple in most of our refrigerators. You can see how it gets from the cow to you at Fair Oaks Dairy Adventure in Fair Oaks (877-536-1194). This operating dairy farm offers a look at modern dairy farming and dairy processing. Exhibits show how the dairy industry cares for cows, protects the environment, and ensures the highest quality milk possible. You can also see cheese and ice cream being made.

Bring the kids. Or not.

During the fall at County Line Orchard in Hobart (219-947-4477), you'll find plenty for the whole family to do. Pick your own apples, observe the beehives, explore the "MAiZE," visit the store and the barn, and take the little ones to the "kids farm" where you'll see animals, hatching chicks, and even "Peter Pumpkin Eater." But around Halloween, you'll want to bring brave grownups only to the "Trail of Fears." You'll start at a shack in the woods, and it gets scarier from there. Actors won't touch you, but that won't stop them from scaring you!

Get picking!

To find more u-pick farms and farmers markets, visit the Indiana Department of Agriculture at www.in.gov/isda/market/. And to plan an entire weekend around fun at the farm, visit enjoyindiana.com.